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'Cloak and dagger boys are here to stay

By JOSEPH VOLZ

Washington (News Bureau)—The killing of Maj. Arthur Nicholson by a Soviet sentry while Nicholson was photographing tanks in East Germany last week raises a question: Is it worth risking humans to gather intelligence in an age when sophisticated space satellites can count the shingles on a Kremlin roof?

Is the human spy becoming obsolete?

Ralph McGehee, who spent 25 years as a field officer with the Central Intelligence Agency, answers yes:

"I don't think you can get anything more in the way of technical intelligence from military people than you can from various satellite programs. I think military intelligence just justifies its budget and manpower by claiming human intelligence is important."

BUT PENTAGON and State Department officials say that on-the-ground intelligence is indispensible.

Former CIA Director William Colby says that intelligence agencies "absolutely" need human sources.

He told the Daily News last week, "We can get a great deal from satellites but there are subtleties of readiness and discipline that can only be observed by humans. Human intelligence is part of the total."

Satellites, despite their ability to take pictures and infrared readings, have limits. The spy satellites are only over a target 15 minutes on each orbit. They cannot take pictures from 100 miles up if the site is covered by clouds and they do not have the ability to take pictures of anything inside a building—as Nicholson apparently was doing immediately before he was killed.

THE SOVIETS also have become adept at putting together a schedule of when the satellites will fly over so they know when to wheel supersecret equipment into sheds.

The United States continues to use high-flying spy planes such as the SR-71 Blackbird, but they have many of the same limitations as satellites.

A high-ranking Pentagon official says of the on-the-ground spy: "There is no substitute for this kind of intelligence. You don't get as good information from space as from being at the scene."

Other officials say the military man on the scene not only can snap closeups of new equipment but, if lucky enough to get close to, say, a new tank, can also scratch it and take a sample of the paint—or even of the metal. Studying new alloys used in tanks is necessary to develop anti-tank warheads for missiles and shoulder-borne anti-tank weapons.

NOT ALL of the intelligence gathered by human operatives comes during clandestine missions, however. One official noted last week that some of the best intelligence the United States receives comes from military attaches aggressively probing Iron Curtain counterparts at cocktail parties.

The Soviets, too, place great importance on the use of their military attaches. For example, Soviet Lt. Gen. Yevgeny Barmyantsev was booted out of the United States in 1983 for spying. Barmyantsev was trying to retrieve what he thought were stolen American secrets from a Maryland tree trunk when the FBI caught him.

Yet, the cost of the U.S. military attaches working for the Defense Intelligence Agency is a drop in the bucket compared to what the Pentagon spends for its huge National Security Agency operation, with headquarters at Fort Meade, Md., 20 miles north of Washington. The NSA uses at least 100,000 servicemen worldwide to man listening posts on the ground as well as on planes and ships to tune in radio transmissions and phone calls.

THE ANNUAL cost for this intelligence gathering by NSA is a staggering $10 billion, compared with about $1.5 billion for the next largest snoop shop, the CIA.

The NSA overheard radio transmissions of Egyptian field commanders before the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict and knew that the war was coming.

NSA has also been able to intercept virtually any microwave message around the world. Overseas messages bounced off a communications satellite can be picked up and sorted out by NSA. If analysts want every satellite message mentioning "Jones," an NSA computer can do it.

To try to do the same job just a decade ago, the NSA had to send FBI and defense intelligence agents to the downtown Washington offices of international communicatons companies to pick up the carbons of every message sent overseas.

THE VERY ability of NSA to sweep up so many messages and transmit them back to Fort Meade is a nightmare for intelligence analysts. They often complain that NSA supplies so much undigested material that the important items can get lost in the deluge.

There have been major foulups. One official recalled that during the Vietnam War NSA picked up a conversation from North Vietnamese troops who knew a team from the south was going to infiltrate. But by the time analysts back in Washington got to look at the material, the team had already been infiltrated—and killed.

It is almost impossible for anyone to conduct on-the-ground intelligence gathering in the Soviet Union, given the closed nature of its society. Americans don't go wandering unobserved around the country and defense attaches have been expelled after being caught peering over fences with their cameras. As a result, satellites end up doing much of that job.

IN FACT, Defense Intelligency Agency estimates on just how much the Soviets are spending on defense are based not so much on work by military attaches as on satellite photos, remarkably accurate, of how many new tanks, planes and ships the Soviets have produced.

Despite their limits, though, human snoopers such as military officers doing so-called legal espionage and CIA officers handling networks of agents will remain on the U.S. payroll for some time to come.

One reason is obvious: The Soviet Union shows no inclination to retire its own spies.